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ABSTRACT

What happened in the small farm community of Elk Point, South Dakota, on January 8, 1986, was unimaginable--a father shot his family and then walked to work and shot himself. Upon learning of the murder/suicide, the Elk Point School District faced the difficult questions of what teachers should say to students, how the district should deal with the news media, and what responsibilities various staff members should assume. After the initial shock, it became apparent that students and the community needed help learning to accept the tragedy. A community crisis team evolved that identified the needs of the community, identified resources inside and outside of the community, and developed a plan for assisting the entire community. The committee agreed that lack of communication within the family and within the community could have led to the murder/suicide. They organized a workshop with the idea of family communication as its focus. The format was a drama followed by small discussion groups with trained counselors acting as group leaders. The drama was a positive first step. The next steps will be workshops to promote the skills needed to communicate within the family. (JHZ)

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Family Communication Awareness/Suicide Prevention

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FAMILY COMMUNICATION AWARENESS/SUICIDE PREVENTION

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This presentation has as a focus the goal of helping community members become more aware of each other. Many factors indicate that society has become desensitized to caring or identifying with the feelings of another person. Empathy is not the strength of the American society today. Some research has implied that television, with its portrayal of violence has influenced children toward being cold and unfeeling. Still other research points to the pressures of these economic times and the financial struggle to survive as a factor in swaying society into unempathetic individuals. The high divorce rate and the dysfunctional family becoming the traditional or the majority of American families also stretches the bindings on love and caring.

In a recent workshop in Denver, Colorado (August, 1986) conducted by Quest International, some alarming statistics were offered through results collected in surveys administered by Quest in 1984 and 1985:

1. In 1950, 30% of all American families had a grandparent living within the household: in 1985, only 2% had a grandparent within the household.

2. In 1950, 48% of all American families were described as traditional; two natural parents and two children. In 1985, 7% of American families were described as above.

3. In 1950, the divorce rate was 7 to 1; in 1985, the divorce rate was 2 to 1.

4. In 1950, the percentage of students entering kindergarten and graduating from high school with the same two natural parents living within the household was 70%, in 1985, it was 21%.

These survey figures are alarming but the reality of these indicators need to be faced; public schools are dealing with a different society and with different children today than thirty years ago and these differences are more challenging for the school system than ever before in history.

Considering all the above components incorporated into the American society today, (recognizing still other factors such as gangs in larger cities, influence of drugs, political factions, sociological history, biological compositions, geographic and demographic changes, and population shifts) it is surely understandable to realize a loss of empathy for neighbors, relatives, and friends.

The time and purpose then for this presentation in this type of setting for the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium is or should be apparent: if society has changed as much as is indicated above, then small communities wherever they are located geographically, cannot be immune to the changes. Small communities need to learn to deal with the forces that are separating individuals and families today. It is this devastating separation of the family and loss of feeling for each other that is causing the turmoil and high suicide rate in America today. This presentation is offering an example of a process that can help unite communities and potentially lead to a higher caring level which will reduce suicide rates and improve conditions in small communities.

Noone could imagine that in a small farm community such as Elk Point, South Dakota, on one early morning on January 8th, 1986, a father could shoot his family and then walk to work and shot himself--noone could imagine that could happen in a town of 1,800 people in a state like South Dakota where the total population is one-third the population of Minneapolis-St. Paul's. To have this kind of a tragedy in Elk Point where the farm land is the best the state has to offer is beyond comprehension: in this small town where people are friendly and pressures are low. However, it did happen in this small community. This murder/suicide occurred along with another murder/suicide the same day in the same county. Within three months of the first incident in January of 1986, there were three more suicides in Union County where Elk Point resides with still more attempts at suicide that luckily failed for some reason or another. Other counties in South Dakota had like suicide rates but less publicity; suicide is becoming more of a popular choice or option for dealing with stress than in the past. Research does indicate that in many cases of suicide, when an individual has a personal relationship with a person committing suicide, that individual begins seeing suicide as an option in handling emotional setbacks. Suicide is a gruesome action that does increase in frequency in certain and specific communities because it does offer another choice in avoiding difficult situations. If a respected friend has successfully committed suicide, the act does not appear as gruesome or as unacceptable. Suicide is not just a large city problem. The pressures of society affect the whole nation regardless of population or socio-economic background. Small towns feel the heavy pressures.

The goal of this presentation is to relate the story of the incidents that occurred in Elk Point, South Dakota from January 8th, 1986 until the present. The hope is that other communities can gain from this experience without having to be shocked into action.

Upon learning of the murder/suicide on January 8th, the Elk Point district was presented with some unique questions that many small districts are rarely confronted with:

1. What do the teachers say to the students; especially the students in the 3rd and 8th grades that shared rooms with two of the murdered children?

2. With the influx of the local, regional, and national news media, how does the district control the reporters? Who does the media speak with: what are the limitations?

3. What are the responsibilities of the guidance counselor, the building administrator, the faculty, and the superintendent?

The guidance counselor, Mr. Steve Griffith, immediately upon learning of the tragedy, visited with Mr. Jensen and it was decided to have Mr. Griffith visit with every class as soon as possible that morning. The reason this decision was reached was based on the logic that if the students heard about the murder/suicide from a trained counselor, it would be better than seeing the story on T.V. or reading about it in the paper because of the distortion and sensationalism the news media usually strives for in a story. A secondary reason for the counselor to visit with the classes, especially the 3rd and 8th grade classes, was to give a good model to the classroom teachers on what to say to their students in this situation. In hindsight, this was the best decision made that day--one of the few. There was also no way to anticipate the emotional problems the students would have in the coming months with accepting this violent crime. Students did have emotional problems as a result of this tragedy:

some students had trouble with sleeping; some worried about their fathers in their losing control of tempers; some students had worries relating to the question of death; some students that were very close to the deceased could not accept their death.

It became apparent that more needed to be done to help students and the community learn to accept the tragedy.

The media was one of the largest concerns on that terrible day. This murder/suicide seemed to attract more attention locally, regionally, and nationally than so many other comparable incidents in other sections of the country. The reason for this media attention was that the father who committed the attrocity was the local manager of the Farmers Home Administration office which has foreclosed on so many farms recently. Many of the reporters' questions focused on the farm crisis and speculation as to why this man did what he did. The school district made attempts at control such as not letting any students speak directly to the media, but these attempts were in vain. Many reporters waited for school to dismiss or caught students and adults downtown. Most of the media people were not cooperative, nor did they respect the efforts of the district at minimizing the harassment of the students. Simply put, the media controlled the district. Better district regulations were needed to control the media: this was identified as a goal for future incidents.

Immediately following the murder/suicide, and after the media had raped the community of most of its dignity and identity, the town was left to lick its wounds and suffer on its own. What was accomplished next may or may not have developed in other situations, but what did evolve out of this tragedy was a learning experience in caring for the community and a process of self-help for the small community of Elk Point. Vehicles were created that not only lead to programs for family and individual counseling but the community became organized with the hopes of creating a better environment for its members.

To begin to unite and help a small community over the shock of this magnitude, there needed to be a spark; someone had to be the one to look to the future and be optimistic in order to find good from devastation. As it turned out, that someone was a church minister, Pastor Don Greenough of the United Parish of Elk Point, and Steve Griffith, school district guidance counselor. They both realized that more help and organization was necessary in this situation because of the deep wounds this type of tragedy leaves in a community. Steve did his organizing within the school district walls through his counseling methods with individual students. Don was left with an endowment from the family of the deceased and with this funding support sought community members from various civic organizations to unite into some sort of committee to plan how to use the funding. This committee was comprised of school district personnel, community business leaders, civic group leaders, and religious group leaders. The intent was that this committee be representative of the community of Elk Point.

After the first meeting of the committee in February of this year, it became clear to all involved as to the purpose of this group.

1. The needs of the community were to be reviewed to identify priorities, especially after such a horrible incident in January.

2. Resources within the community needed to be identified.

3. Resources outside the community needed to be identified.

4. A plan had to be developed as to the most appropriate method required for giving aid to an entire community.

The type of aid demanded was a special challenge for this committee because the aid called for was theraputic or psychological in nature; the tragedy was not a natural disaster caused by wind, rain, or fire; and money was not the only support essential for a good program of community help. This committee took on the battle of inspiring a community to care about its neighbors and family members; and as was indicated in the beginning of this presentation, this battle would be a major confrontation with all the societal forces working against this committee.

In the review of community needs, the committee analyzed the events before and after the tragedy. The discussion that transpired at the second meeting in February led the group to agreeing that lack of communication within the family and within the community was a reason that could have led to the murder/suicide. Secondly, following the incident, more school district and community control of the media was a necessity in future situations because of the additional hurt they caused. Thirdly, long term family or group counseling was needed in addition to the counseling provided through the school counselor. Finally, it was concluded that the most efficient method of reaching the entire community was to sponsor a workshop. The workshop was to be organized with the idea of family communication as its focus.

Mr. Griffith's involvement on the committee was nominal since it was the superintendent who was the school's representative, but Steve was part of another important self-help group and that was the child protection team. This team is concerned with the social welfare of children in the community. They also sponsored a workshop for the community in March of 1986. This workshop centered on child abuse awareness. The benefit of Mr. Griffith's representation on the child protection team was a big plus for the community in that a double-shot approach could be used to help the community. Also, the child protection team and the crisis committee, through Mr. Griffith, compared notes and so avoided any duplication of purpose in the workshops presented in Elk Point.

In the identification of helping agencies within and outside the community, one agency that was contracted and responded quickly was the Family Services in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The director, Mr. William Bishop, was sympathetic to the problem and met with the committee in another February meeting to discuss the possibility of a March workshop. Through Bishop's contributions at the meeting, a new twist was offered as a powerful way to teach or to increase the level of awareness for the need to communicate within the family; a drama presentation. Mr. Bishop contacted some individuals in Sioux Falls that were connected with a professional theater group. These theater people, then, with Mr. Bishop and members from the crisis team, met and discussed what the drama presentation should consist of and how it should be presented. Since an identified priority was family communication the decision was made to offer a play based upon some kind of family crisis. The theater then created and produced this play which was presented on March 26th, 1986 as a community in-service at the Elk Point SChool District.

The inservice was publicized through every kind of media available through the month of March, which was a positive use of the media. Another goal of the crisis committee was to effectively use and control the media. The committee delegated this project to Mr. Jensen. Since the students were so greatly affected by the negative publicity in January, the high school student council wanted some authority and control in this workshop presentation to protect the student body. The student council, then under the leadership of its president, Lucky Huber, composed a list of regulations for any media people to adhere to and delegated three student council officers to be the liaison officials between the media and the student council. Again, the media was very interested in this workshop and again for the reasons of creating a newsworthy story, but the committee's intent was going to be heard; the farm crisis was not the focus of the workshop -- helping the community to care about one another was the purpose. With the total control of the media by the school district and by the community, there was much less damage done and the media did not have any options or avenues to pursue with such a united effort. This approach was very successful.

A hurdle the committee had to confront was the cost of the theater group and the extra counselors required to present the workshop. For the drama presentations alone the cost was $1,200.; additional costs were transportation,

and eating needs for the workshop participants. The endowment provided for $700, therefore, the $500 balance had to be sought elsewhere. Mr. Jensen contacted the city council, social agencies both locally and state-wide, private industry, churches, and some political people. The success came with the political organization. Because Elk Point is a rural community, the aid the workshop was offering was also a help to the farm households. Because of this reason, Mr. Jensen contacted the Department of Agriculture and after submitting a proposal to that office, received $400.00 to help present the program. The remaining dollars were provided through the school district and the United Parish Church. The supper was provided through donations and volunteer help from the community.

The actual presentation of the drama on March 26th, was scheduled to include every student, K-12, and the interested adults in Elk Point and surrounding communities. The students were grouped by grades in groups no larger than 45 in grades K-6. The 7th and 8th grade students viewed the presentation as one large group as did the high school. The faculty supervised different groups so they all could view the drama. The community members were offered the play at night. Immediately following the moving story presented in the play, all groups were separated into smaller discussion clusters to promote good communication. Trained counselors were group discussion leaders assigned to specific groups to help spark the conversation. Upon viewing the play, because it was such a deeply emotional presentation, the discussion was right on target since almost every family had had arguments at home so there was a common relating point.

Finding

The marriage of the drama presentation and the discussion sessions could not have been better planned. Because the play was so emotional, it hit everyone involved in a personal area; everyone could identify with the emotion because they had all lived through comparable situations. In the adult groups, the conversation started slowly but once it did start, the momentum grew like a train beginning to build speed. Innermost feelings were shared; fears were shared; and tears were shared; there was very little wasted time on conversation. In the children's discussion groups, the strong emotion was still there but the level of conversation was different than the adults. They were full of questions about the murder/suicide; questions which related their fears. Divorce was mentioned in question in an effort to ask why. Family violence was discussed through questions. The high school students were the most quiet group, basically because of peer pressure. The success of this awareness workshop in family communication was phenomenal.

The crisis committee met in April following the workshop to discuss the evaluations. The overall conclusion was that although there could have been more adults at the night session, the first workshop was a wonderful success. Much of the feedback the committee received was good. However, some of the older people in town saw the drama presentation as a negative influence on children. They felt that this kind of feeling and this kind of presentation is not something the school should be associated with since it is exposing young children to visable anger. The basic logic was that the least said the better; these kind of things are better to be not talked about; it might influence the children into bad behavior.

The committee disagreed with this logic on the premise that not giving people an opportunity to discuss their feelings is bad psychologically. Repression of feelings and keeping those feelings inside has never been a recommendation from the counseling field. This repression only causes more long-term problems. Furthermore, the children need to know that agruments and disagreements do happen in every home; it cannot be avoided. However, it is the healthy ventilation of feelings that the committee is striving for in the home, and to be able to decide what is excessive violence and anger in order to change that behavior was the goal of the committee.

Any type of a workshop that affects so many people so effectively, one way or another, is a productive workshop. The crisis committee was entirely satisfied with this first workshop experience, but the work has just started. The workshop in March was the first of many; the goal of making the community aware of the need for family communication has happened with positive results. The next step the crisis committee is endeavoring to promote is the actual skills needed to begin to communicate again within the family. Workshops following will strive for enlarging the definition of the term 'family' to include neighbors and the community.

There has been a ripling affect resulting from the workshop presented and the crisis team approach in Elk Point. The student council has targeted the misuse of drugs and alcohol as a priority area of influence for this coming year and

Finding (Continued)

are working on a regional convention in November to identify the student council's role in reducing the use of drugs in school. The business people downtown have formed a committee with the purpose of attracting new industry to Elk Point. The city council donated $300.00 to the school district to help fund a Quest program in the middle school. The Lions Club have donated funds and time to the school and community to help develop programs within the school such as Quest and the school team approach to solving drug problems. The Lions Club also sponsored an after-prom party for the juniors and seniors with $1,000. of donated prices as enticement.

Family services out of Sioux Falls have now extended their service to Elk Point in the form of one counselor offered to the community twice a week. The funding for the counselor is provided particially through the United Way and through private individuals at a set rate. The office needed is provided through the United Parish Church.

Conclusion

This process of organizing a community crisis team is not new, but it was successful where some others have failed. The time needed to organize the workshop was not all that consuming and the program fell together very well. It is a possibility that this process worked so well because the tragedy brought the need to the community to realize the importance of communication, but the proof of the success of the crisis team will be in time. The team at this point is rather optimistic, but also not to the point of being naive as to the hurdles that team will be confronted with in the coming months.

Elk Point is not yet an inspired community excited about caring for one another: far from it. With the location of Elk Point being 20 miles from Sioux City, Iowa, and 14 miles from the University of South Dakota and with most of the working force (other than farmers) working out of town, the town is definitely a bedroom community. This means there is little feeling for a strong cohesive community. Many neighbors do not know one another; nor do they have the time or desire to actively pursue a relationship. The transient population is an influence in the community because the county seat and welfare office is located in Elk Point. The economic atmosphere in the community is very poor; the downtown is comprised of very few businesses because of the severe competition of the larger cities and poor farm produce prices. Understanding all these local problems plus the societal problems eluded to before in this presentation, the crisis team still is determined to stay together. With the spark this team has ignited, there may be a chance to bring the community closer together.

If community people can become aware of the necessity for active communication (listening and caring), then suicides will be greatly reduced. If people in dire need of help can take advantage of a local counselor or a self-help phone number; if they have somewhere to look for healthy options other than suicide; then the crisis team approach was well worth the effort.

1. Handouts - 1. Media control
2. Mr. Bishop's suicide prevention
3. Overheads
4. Resources identified
5. One half inch video tape
6. Presentation agenda
7. Hand out on the process of organization